From counterculture to cyberculture : Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth network, and the rise of digital utopianism / Fred Turner, The University of Chicago Press, 2006.

To answer these questions, this book traces the previously untold history of an extraordinarily influential group of San Francisco Bay area journalists and entrepreneurs: Stewart Brand and the Whole Earth network. Between the late 1960s and the late 1990s, Brand assembled a network of people and publications that together brokered a series of encounters between bo- hemian San Francisco and the emerging technology hub of Silicon Valley to the south. In 1968 Brand brought members of the two worlds together in the pages of one of the defining documents of the era, the Whole Earth Catalog. In 1985 he gathered them again on what would become perhaps the most influential computer conferencing system of the decade, the Whole Earth ’Lectronic Link, or the WELL. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Brand and other members of the network, including Kevin Kelly, Howard Rheingold, Esther Dyson, and John Perry Barlow, became some of the most-quoted spokespeople for a countercultural vision of the Internet. In 1993 all would help create the magazine that, more than any other, depicted the emerging digital world in revolutionary terms: Wired.

By recounting their history, this book reveals and helps to explain a complex intertwining of two legacies: that of the military-industrial research culture, which first appeared during World War II and flourished across the cold war era, and that of the American counterculture. Since the 1960s scholarly and popular accounts alike have described the counterculture in terms first expressed by its members—that is, as a culture antithetical to the technologies and social structures powering the cold war state and its defense industries. In this view the 1940s and 1950s are often seen as a gray time shaped by rigid social norms, hierarchical institutions, and the constant demands of America’s nuclear face-off with the Soviet Union. The 1960s seem to explode onto the scene in a Technicolor swirl of personal exploration and political protest, much of it aimed at bringing down the cold war military-industrial bureaucracy. Those who accept this version of events tend to account for the persistence of the military-industrial complex today, and for the continuing growth of corporate capitalism and consumer culture as well, by arguing that the authentically revolutionary ideals of the generation of 1968 were somehow co-opted by the forces they opposed.

There is some truth to this story. Yet, as it has hardened into legend, this version of the past has obscured the fact the same military-industrial re- search world that brought forth nuclear weapons—and computers—also gave rise to a free-wheeling, interdisciplinary, and highly entrepreneurial style of work. In the research laboratories of World War II and later, in the massive military engineering projects of the cold war, scientists, soldiers, technicians, and administrators broke down the invisible walls of bureaucracy and collaborated as never before. As they did, they embraced both computers and a new cybernetic rhetoric of systems and information. They began to imagine institutions as living organisms, social networks as webs of information, and the gathering and interpretation of information as keys to understanding not only the technical but also the natural and social worlds.

By the late 1960s, so too did substantial elements of the counterculture. Between 1967 and 1970, for instance, tens of thousands of young people set out to establish communes, many in the mountains and the woods. It was for them that Brand first published the Whole Earth Catalog. For these back-to-the-landers, and for many others who never actually established new communities, traditional political mechanisms for creating social change had come up bankrupt. Even as their peers organized political parties and marched against the Vietnam War, this group, whom I will call the New Communalists, turned away from political action and toward technology and the transformation of consciousness as the primary sources of social change. If mainstream America had become a culture of conflict, with riots at home and war abroad, the commune world would be one of harmony. If the American state deployed massive weapons systems in order to destroy faraway peoples, the New Communalists would deploy small-scale technologies—ranging from axes and hoes to amplifiers, strobe lights, slide projectors, and LSD—to bring people together and allow them to experience their common humanity. Finally, if the bureaucracies of industry and government demanded that men and women become psychologically fragmented specialists, the technology-induced experience of togetherness would allow them to become both self-sufficient and whole once again. For this wing of the counterculture, the technological and intellectual output of American research culture held enormous appeal. Although they rejected the military-industrial complex as a whole, as well as the political process that brought it into being, hippies from Manhattan to Haight- Ashbury read Norbert Wiener, Buckminster Fuller, and Marshall McLuhan.

Through their writings, young Americans encountered a cybernetic vision of the world, one in which material reality could be imagined as an information system. To a generation that had grown up in a world beset by massive armies and by the threat of nuclear holocaust, the cybernetic notion of the globe as a single, interlinked pattern of information was deeply comforting: in the invisible play of information, many thought they could see the possibility of global harmony.